

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Pro Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellor, Dean of Education, staff, graduates and family and friends of our graduates.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora Nation - traditional owners of the land on which this university stands.

This is such an exciting day and I am very honoured to be asked to share it with you. I know that many of you are already working in your first teaching jobs.

And some of you are newly relaunched into your careers with all that extra knowledge and new skills that a postgraduate qualification brings.

I obtained my masters from UTS so I very enthusiastically congratulate you on your choice of university.

And as an old ex-teacher I envy you all the skills and knowledge you take with you into your career from this particular university.

It was actually 40 years ago to the very year, in 1966, that I stood in front of my first class. It was the day before my nineteenth birthday. My class was 4B and there were 45 children in the class. One of them was Elizabeth - and today it is Elizabeth I want to tell you about.

Back then we used to teach what was called Social Studies. We had a textbook which had a - usually very badly drawn - picture on the top with a bit of text underneath and questions under that. If you were clever and arty - and of course I was - you would redraw the picture on the black board - it was black in those days - using a wonderful full range of pastel coloured chalk.

We used to call this - 1966 teacher talk - the stimulus.

I remember being particularly pleased with my drawing of the Endeavour - sails billowing - for a lesson on Captain Cook. This was stimulus deluxe.

I had actually gone beyond the textbook. I had found a copy of the Dutch map that Cook took with him on his voyage in 1770. I even had a sealed envelope with his secret orders.

And I was on a roll - with all the enthusiasm a first year teacher could muster. We read the textbook, studied the map, opened the secret orders and sailed majestically into Botany Bay - and were right in to answering those questions in the textbook when Elizabeth put up her hand ...

Miss - she said - totally trusting of her teenage teacher - Were there aboriginals living in Botany Bay when Captain Cook arrived?

Yes I said, of course there were.

Well, she said - how can you discover somewhere - where people already live?

You have to remember this was 40 years ago - long before most of you were born - and before most of your parents started school.

Elizabeth's question - of course - changed my lesson. Stopped it dead, really. In fact it changed forever how I taught Captain Cook. I even wondered **why** I was teaching Captain Cook.

She challenged very basically what I was teaching and why I was teaching it.

It was Elizabeth's question that made me realise - and it wasn't a shock - it was a kind of slow dawning - how much of what I taught was very politically driven.

I have had a few tricky questions as a teacher. One I remember was from Sam, after a news session about a plane crash in Switzerland. About 100 people had been killed - which was an enormous number in those days. The biggest planes only carried about 150 people.

Sam said - You know the stuff they make the black box out of - that never gets broken - why don't they make the whole plane out of it?

Last I heard about Sam was he was in jail along with his two elder brothers.

Then there was Hanna during my annual, miraculously sprouting kidney bean lesson ...

Miss - what do you plant to grow seedless watermelons?

I love it that now teachers are not expected to be the font of all wisdom and answer all the questions - that now you give children the skills to answer their own questions - and blessed is the Internet - which is where you will have to go if you want to know the answers to those questions.

Actually, the black box is an Australian invention. It was mentioned on TV last night - Channel 9 I think - where the answer to Sam's question was given. Very random, as my daughters would say.

But, getting back to Elizabeth ...

I wanted to tell you about Elizabeth because during the past 13 years - as I have been writing a highly political column on education in *The Daily Telegraph* - I often think about her and how much she delighted and challenged me in my first year of teaching.

She is probably running some international corporation now. Sometimes when I read about an Elizabeth who is head of this or blazing the way in that, I wonder if it is **my** Elizabeth.

I also think of her often because during my years as a columnist I have seen just about everything to do with teaching become politicised.

Today it is not just what you teach, it is how - and when - how you assess what you teach - and even how you report that assessment to parents. It is what your lecturers teach you. It is all political fodder.

The recent face-off between the state and federal governments and the teachers union over "A to E" in reports is a good example.

As an old news hand I can predict now both governments will claim an A for themselves when the first of these reports go home at the end of this year. Remember my prediction when BOTH Julie Bishop and Carmel Tebbutt - if they are still around - take a bow.

Meanwhile, as you are left to work out those A to E grades - and I could talk for ages about all the problems that will involve - you will be reminded that just about everything you do as a teacher is political.

So today I want to say to you - **be political back.**

Don't just argue in the staffroom or over the dinner table - do something!

And I am not just talking about joining a union; join your professional association - English teachers, Maths teachers, primary school teachers, special education. If you are an executive - or when you become one - join your deputy or principals association.

Go to meetings, contribute to journals, write to politicians - even to *The Daily Telegraph*. The letters pages are the most read pages in a newspaper. Every politician and bureaucrat reads them.

Have your say when discussion papers are aired. Read them, talk about them, write in submissions.

Don't be swept along by the changes. Be part of them. Be part of the political process.

Politics has intruded universally into your profession. I urge you - with all of the energy you can muster - to **be political back.**

But politics considered - this is such an exciting time to be launching a teaching career and reaping the benefits of postgraduate qualifications in NSW school systems.

- Never before have we known so much about what works in a classroom – UTS graduates in particular. You can all take a bow – your lecturers and course designers especially.
- With the founding of the NSW Institute of Teachers and Teach Australia your professional standing has been firmly established and can only grow.
- Last year teachers won a generous salary increase **without a strike** for the first time since 1968 - and I see this as the new level of value our state government has placed on teachers.
- And within the next five years something like 80 per cent of school executives in this state will be retiring. It is finally goodbye to the baby boomers.
- The average age of school principals will plummet from mid fifties to around mid thirties. So the opportunities for a spectacular career for everyone here today are boundless.

These are good years to be involved in your chosen profession.

I wish you all the best.

And especially - if you have not found one of your own yet - and you may well have - I wish you all an Elizabeth - or a Mohammed or Hanna or Sam.

There will be difficult times and difficult children. But today I wish for you those special children who will challenge and delight you - ask you impossible questions - and make you feel deeply that what you do makes a difference.

And my last wish for you - that will only ever work if you remember today - may your planes always be made out of black box stuff - and may your seedless watermelons always blossom.